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ABSTRACT

The Cree and Cherokee syllabary systems were designed by gifted amateurs, such as Sequoyah, who received no funding or significant institutional support. Although he had influential kinsmen in his matrilineage, his project encountered active, widespread opposition from his contemporaries prior to its validation in 1821. Sequoyah found it necessary to teach a second Cherokee speaker to read and write his syllabary. This was essential to demonstrate its utility since to validate the system there must be two literate people. Sequoyah prevailed upon one of his young daughters, Ahyokeh, to learn his newly invented alphabet, which she rapidly learned to write and read fluently. The choice of this daughter to serve as his collaborator may have been fortuitous since she was too ingenuous to share in the popular wisdom that the syllabary would never work and just young enough to have the imagination and learning capability required for her role in the demonstration, validation and refinement of her father's invention. Ahyokeh played a key role in the important matter of convincing the skeptics. Yet it is one thing to invent a writing system and quite another thing to get people to use it. In the latter respect, Ahyokeh's contributions in validating the Cherokee syllabary seem to have been invaluable. (ERB)

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How Literacy Came to the Cherokees and the Role of Ahyokeh in the Demonstration, Validation and Refinement of Sequoyah's Syllabary.

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Native literacy programs in Indian American communities over the past two decades have had a rather mediocre track record, despite the fact that they seem to have been well conceived, amply funded, and staffed by highly trained and dedicated linguists and social scientists. This being the case, it might be in order to review the history of the literacy movement which swept through Cherokee society in the 1820s and try to identify the factors that contributed to its extraordinary success and longevity. To the same end, we might examine the history of the other 2 great traditions of literacy of the 19th Century, Fox-Pot-Ott in the Great Lakes area and Cree further North, which have much in common with the Cherokee phenomenon. The similarities between these three enduring and very successful traditions of literacy, and the differences between them and more recent literacy programs, may be worth identifying and pondering.

The Cree and Cherokee systems, at least, were designed by gifted amateurs who received no funding or significant institutional support. Although Sequoyah had influential kinsmen in his matrilineage, his project encountered active, widespread opposition from his contemporaries prior to its validation in 1821. According to George Lowry's account, interpreted into English, and then transcribed by John Howard Payne in 1835, Sequoyah

> built him a cabin apart from his family and there would study and contrive. To this cabin he confined himself for a year, the whole charge of his farm and family devolving on his wife. When all his friends had remonstrated in vain, his wife went in and capped the climax of her reasonings by flinging his whole apparatus of papers and books into the fire, and thus he lost his first labors; but...after two more years of applications [he] completed his work (Payne 1977:392).

So Sequoyah got no support.

James Evans, who invented the Cree syllabary in 1840, or slightly earlier, also suffered from a lack of support. After he challenged the HBC and Church of England, the establishment dealt swiftly with him: he was tried by a Hudson Bay Company Court, convicted of "immoral conduct," and deported to England, where he was exonerated shortly before he died, a pauper, in 1846 (Walker 1969:152).

There are many other parallels. All three writing systems were quickly learned and used by adults, as well as children. Compare the 1960s "War on Poverty" which tended to target small children for attention, as in Headstart Programs, writing off their older siblings and, of course, their parents. Compare also the shortlived attempt by the Moravians in the early 19th C. to teach Cherokee children to read in a roman alphabet. The project was discontinued in the 1820s when children and adults alike learned the syllabary (Foster 1885: 124-125).

All 3 traditions of literacy were associated from the beginning, it would seem, with both sacred and secular contexts. It is certain that by 1826 "a regular correspondence was opened and kept up...between the Cherokees of Will's Valley [in Georgia] and their [relatives in Arkansas,] five-hundred miles away...." (Foster 1885:110), and that, by 1825, a syllabic version of the third chapter of the Gospel of John, translated by the Christian Cherokee, DH , or John Arch, had been "copied many hundred times" (Foster 1885: 120-121). It is evident that from the beginning Cherokees used literacy to communicate with distant relatives, to learn the secrets of the White man's religion, to inform themselves, and as a kind of entertaining social activity that no doubt had a certain novelty value. And learning to read was a social activity. According to Foster, Cherokees learned literacy at the fireside "and the parents are the teachers" (1885:149). As Mooney described it, "thousands of hitherto illiterate Cherokee [in the early 1820s] were... teaching each other in the cabins and along the roadside (1900:102).

Something like this seems to have happened in Central Canada in the 1840s - literacy for all ages and all circumstances and entirely out of control. And there were no impediments to learning, like punctuation or spelling conventions or capitalization or "proper" grammar.

Finally, all three traditions are based on syllabic writing systems. You just look at the syllabics, calling out their names from left to right and top to bottom, supplying intonation, voicing, and rhythm as required.

Sequoyah found it necessary to teach a second Cherokee speaker to read and write his syllabary. This was essential to demonstrate its utility. How could the skeptics be made to realize that he was not simply deluding himself when he purported to "read" texts from graphic signs, except by writing messages dictated by the skeptics and then having them read aloud by a second party who had not heard the messages dictated and had not been in communication with the writer? To validate the system there must be two literate people. In pursuing his research and developing his theory, however, Sequoyah had alienated his family and friends. "At length," according to John Stuart, who interviewed Sequoyah in the 1830s, he "prevailed upon one of his young daughters to learn of him his newly invented alphabet, and its arrangement, she being the only one of his family, and in fact the only person, he could prevail on to undertake the supposed useless task. She made rapid progress in learning, and soon became able to write and read with ease and fluency any thing the father would write" (Stuart 1837-1838, as quoted in Foreman 1938:38).

According to John Alexander, who interviewed Sequoyah in 1840, the daughter who learned to read was "not more than six" (Foreman 1938:41). McKenney and Hall stated that the child's name was "Ahyokah" and that she was "about six years of age" when she learned to read (1842:68). According to Foster (1885:105) her name was "Ahyokeh" and she was "six years old"

at the time of the test and validation of the syllabary in 1821.

So it appears that Sequoyah's only collaborator in the crucial, experimental phase of his research, and when the system was tested and confirmed, was a six-year old.

The choice of this daughter to serve as his collaborator may have been fortuitous. She was too ingenuous to share in the popular wisdom that the syllabary would never work and just young enough to have the imagination and learning capability required for her role in the demonstration, validation and refinement of her father's invention.

Ahyokeh may have played a key role in perfecting the syllabary. Elias Boudinot, the bilingual Christian Cherokee who later translated the New Testament into syllabics, wrote in 1832 that Sequoyah's daughter helped to reduce the inventory of syllabic characters from about 200 to 86 (Boudinot 1832, as quoted in Foreman 1938:23).

Mooney credited Sequoyah with the crucial refinement of the syllabary which consisted of writing consonant clusters in which the first element was s, with a sequence of characters - one for s itself, and another for the appropriate CV syllable (1900:227). I.e., there's 1 character that represents s, not a syllable, so sCV syllables can be written s + CV.

I would hazard a guess that this refinement was made after Sequoyah and Ahyokeh had actually used the syllabary and discussed the problem posed by consonant clusters. Only a six-year old would have the requisite resourcefulness and impertinence perhaps to advocate the attainment of parsimony by retreating from the most basic principle of the system - the one-to-one correspondence between syllables and characters. A parallel development occurred in the Cree area, incidentally, with the introduction of the so-called "appendages" to represent non-prevocalic consonants.

Whatever her role may have been in modifying the Cherokee syllabary, Ahyokeh surely played a key role in the equally important matter of convincing the skeptics. Sequoyah was visited by Colonel Lowry shortly after Ahyokeh learned the syllabary. On this occasion, according to McKenney and Hall (1842:68), Sequoyah

> requested his little daughter to repeat the alphabet. The child, without hesitation, recited the characters, giving to each the sound which the inventor had assigned to it, and performing the task with such ease and rapidity that [Lowry was astonished]

Lowry was not yet convinced; but McKenney and Hall affirm that

> his attention was arrested;... and [he] began to doubt whether Sequoyah was the deluded schemer which others thought him (McKenney and Hall 1842:68).

According to William Griffin's eye-witness account, as reported in Foster (1885), it was a son, not a daughter of Sequoyah, who participated in the test and demonstration of the syllabary in 1821.

This testimony is not altogether reliable, however, because Griffin's account was given orally to Rev. A.N. Chamberlin, who then recorded it in the letter which became Foster's source. Perhaps the son was really a daughter in the original account.

Stuart's account of the meeting at which the syllabary was validated specifically mentions the presence of the daughter who had been "prevailed upon" to learn to read but makes no mention of a son:

> A meeting...was held, of the people, on the subject, and by separating the father and daughter, and requiring them to write, as dictated to, by the company, and to read, while separated, the writing of each as dictated to them by others, and that being accordingly done in every instance, led the persons present into a full conviction of the truth, as well as the utility, of the <u>invention</u>. And

> several of the most influential men in the nation immediately learned it, and discovering all its practical advantages, recommended it in high terms to the people. From that time it spread into general use; and the people of the nation are at this day [1838] in the full enjoyment of its great benefits (Stuart 1837-1838, as quoted in Foreman 1938: 38-39).

It's one thing to invent a writing system and quite another thing to get people to use it. In this latter respect Ahyokeh's contributions in validating the Cherokee syllabary seem to have been invaluable. No doubt the success of the Cree syllabary can also be attributed in large part to Evans' Cree collaborators.

The success of a literacy program cannot be predicted from the elegance of its writing system or the persuasiveness of its promoters. The history of the 19th century suggests that native literacy is accepted to the extent that it's based on a syllabic writing system, it's available to adults, it's adapted to both sacred and secular contexts, and perhaps that it's disseminated independently of White educational institutions.

But the 19th century scenarios need not lead inevitably to success in present circumstances. Today, with bilingualism and English literacy so prevalent, systems based on the roman alphabet are far more attractive than they were to 19th century monolinguals with no previous experience with reading. Indeed, the prevalence of English literacy may call into question the need for a native literacy of <u>any</u> kind.

Bill Leap (1975), Betsy Brandt (1981) and others have taught us that native literacy, which <u>I</u> think was seen in the 19th century as providing access to the White man's secrets, is seen today as threatening the loss of Indians' control over their <u>own</u> secrets. In short there may be very compelling reasons why 20th century native literacy is in a holding pattern.

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